



## Clinical education

## Student nurses' perceptions of clinical placements in Australian Prison Health Services: A mixed methods study



Thea F. van de Mortel, PhD, MHLthSc, Bsc(Hons), DipNurs Associate Professor, Deputy Head of School (Learning & Teaching)<sup>a,\*</sup>,  
 Judith Needham, EdD MN(Management) BN RN RM Dr, Professional Practice Director<sup>b</sup>,  
 Kate Barnewall, MAdvPrac GradCertHlthProfEd BN RN RM Professional Practice Coordinator<sup>c</sup>,  
 Ashleigh Djachenko, BN, GCertCPrimaryHCare, GDipHealthRes, RN Nurse Educator<sup>d</sup>,  
 Jennifer Patrick, MAdvPrac (InfPrevent&Cont) GradCertCritCare(ICU) GradCertClinEd RN RM Research Assistant<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Nursing and Midwifery, Griffith University, Parklands Drive, Southport, QLD, 4222, Australia

<sup>b</sup> School of Nursing and Midwifery, Griffith University, University Drive, Meadowbrook, QLD, 4131, Australia

<sup>c</sup> School of Nursing and Midwifery, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Road, QLD, 4111, Australia

<sup>d</sup> West Moreton Hospital Health Service - Prison Health Service, Locked Bag 500, Archerfield, QLD, 4108, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

Increasing demands for clinical placements have forced tertiary institutions to look for alternative placements for third year nursing students. While Prison Health Services provide an opportunity for nursing students to engage in care of offender populations with significant chronic illnesses, there has been little evaluation of such placements.

Third year undergraduate nurses (18/46) participated in a mixed methods study to provide evidence-based research on students' perceptions of clinical placements in Prison Health Services. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via an anonymous survey and individual interview.

Whilst the majority of students valued the opportunity to increase their knowledge and clinical skills and felt supported by preceptors, challenges included being psychologically ill-prepared for the physical and emotional aspects of placement, and witnessing poor attitudes and behaviours of staff, which impacted on the quality of their experience.

Recommendations include changes to orientation programs and introduction of simulation to help students feel better prepared and supported during placements in prison settings. Refining the selection process for placements in this setting will also help to ensure student suitability for clinical placement in Prison Health Services.

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### 1. Introduction

Griffith University has participated in a new placement initiative with four metropolitan Prison Health Services since March 2014,

and is the only tertiary provider placing nursing students in these facilities in our region. Given the very limited information in the literature on nursing students' experiences of these placements it was imperative to determine whether this new setting was providing quality clinical placements that met course aims and student needs. The study aim was to work collaboratively with Prison Health Services to investigate the student experience of placements.

Increasing demand for clinical placements required that innovative alternative placements for third year nursing students be

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [t.vandemortel@griffith.edu.au](mailto:t.vandemortel@griffith.edu.au) (T.F. van de Mortel), [j.needham@griffith.edu.au](mailto:j.needham@griffith.edu.au) (J. Needham), [k.barnewall@griffith.edu.au](mailto:k.barnewall@griffith.edu.au) (K. Barnewall), [Ashleigh.Djachenko@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:Ashleigh.Djachenko@health.qld.gov.au) (A. Djachenko), [j.patrick@griffith.edu.au](mailto:j.patrick@griffith.edu.au) (J. Patrick).

sourced that provided opportunities to develop advanced decision-making skills to work with individuals and populations. Students needed to develop their nursing practice and explore concepts in relation to health promotion, primary health care, community development, primary care, health education and literacy, and cultural safety. To meet these needs, new placements were sought in non-traditional placement areas, including Prison Health Services.

Prisoners often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have significant, complex and often chronic health conditions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2015a,b). Recent national data obtained from Australian prisons confirmed that prisoners have higher levels of chronic disease, mental illness, substance abuse, disability and communicable disease than the general population, and indigenous Australians have incarceration rates 13 times higher than the general population (AIHW, 2015a; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015b).

Various socioeconomic factors are linked to poor health in offender populations including homelessness, previous incarceration, parental incarceration, poor education, cultural background and unemployment. As prison staff and visitors pass between the prison and the community, and prisoners may act as reservoirs of infection upon their release, prison health can also influence public health (Enggist et al., 2014).

In the correctional setting the primary healthcare providers are nurses (Almost et al., 2013; AIHW, 2015a,b; Durcan, 2006), and the secure, regulated, and punitive environment can be challenging when providing care for prisoners with complex health needs who may also be manipulative and/or aggressive. Prison health nurses require specialised knowledge, and excellent assessment and clinical decision-making skills to make a difference to the health and lives of their patients. They must also have knowledge of prison management procedures to ensure they work safely in this setting. In some countries, for example the United Kingdom, extensive work has been carried out to develop and evaluate educational programs for prison nurses to support them to provide quality care for offenders [see for example, Bennett et al., (2010)].

Given that drug and alcohol abuse, and mental and physical illness increase the chance of recidivism (Thomas et al., 2015; Warrilow, 2012), careful assessment, screening and vaccination, development of compliance and self-care behaviours, provision of care, management of mental illness, discharge planning, and preparation of offenders to improve healthcare access following release are ways in which nurses can impact on prisoner and community health and wellbeing (Enggist et al., 2014).

The complex health conditions and backgrounds of offender populations may provide a rich source of learning for nursing students on clinical placement, who may gain insights into issues that marginalised groups encounter (Filek et al., 2013).

## 2. Background

The health profile of the offender population offers an opportunity for nursing students to work with indigenous patients and those with mental illness, and develop their knowledge and skills in health promotion, population health, primary care, and advanced clinical decision-making.

There are various reports of student nurses completing clinical placements in correctional settings. For example, according to Felton et al. (1987) nursing participation in the correctional setting in the USA dates from the civil rights and antiwar movements in the 1960's. Subsequently, undergraduate student nurse placements have been reported in the Los Lunas Prison Farm in New Mexico (Kaufman et al., 1979), South Carolina Department of Corrections (Felton et al., 1987), Rikers Island jail in New York (Georges, 1986;

Tewa, 2014), Florida (Chapell and Chase, 1986), Canada (Cohen and Gregory, 2009), the United Kingdom (Faculty of Health Social Care and Education (2015); Norman, 1999), the Philippines (Juanitez, 2015), and in both private and public prisons in Australia (Forensicare, 2015; Justice Health and Forensic Mental Health Network, 2015; Martin and Happell, 2001).

While Prison Health Services are not traditional sources of clinical placements, Stewart (2007) suggests they could be beneficial to both students and staff. Some reported benefits include opportunities to develop skills in inter-professional teamwork, interpersonal relationships, patient advocacy, health assessment, health promotion and education and enhance practical skills (Georges, 1986; Tewa, 2014). Chapell and Chase (1986) agree such placements can enhance clinical skills particularly in health maintenance and illness prevention, while Cohen and Gregory (2009) suggest prison placements offer students opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills, while seeing health as rooted in social structures, enabling learning in relation to social justice, equity, and the social determinants of health. Similarly, Juanitez (2015) also noted increased awareness of the social determinants of health amongst students undergoing placements in prison health, and Werlin and O'Brien (1984) who surveyed Registered Nurses upgrading to a degree who were placed in the correctional setting, found that these students developed more positive attitudes towards prisoners.

Several studies have examined the benefits of placing students in prison mental health services specifically. Pernelj-Taylor and Johnson (1996) felt that placement of undergraduate nursing students in prison mental health services was useful to hone mental health nursing skills, and Martin and Happell (2001), who evaluated student nurse placements at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health, found students' understanding of mental health nursing increased and their attitudes towards mental health nursing became more positive.

However, the majority of the aforementioned studies did not formally evaluate the setting as a placement environment, or relied on course teachers views of the outcomes, and in the rare instances where undergraduate nursing students were asked about their experiences the sample size was very small and the data from nursing students were not identifiable from that of other health care students, or the study focused on one aspect of nursing experience such as mental health (Kaufman et al., 1979; Martin and Happell, 2001). Thus the aim of this study was to investigate student experiences of placements in the Prison Health setting. The specific research questions were:

1. What were students' perceptions of the Prison Health Services placement?
2. What were students' perceptions of their preceptors in this setting?
3. What could be done to improve the placement experience in this setting?

## 3. Research design

### 3.1. Design and participants

A mixed methods approach, including collection of quantitative and qualitative survey data and qualitative interview data from students placed with Prison Health Services, was utilised. All third year undergraduate nurses (n = 46) who attended placements in four metropolitan prisons in semester 2, 2015, were invited to participate.

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